DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 932 CS 012 143

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TITLE Whole Language vs. Phonics.
INSTITUTION Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association, Austin.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 6p.; Part 1 of this article, published separately under title "What Every Principal Should Know About Teaching Reading", see CS 012 142.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
JOURNAL CIT Instructional Leader; v8 n2 p1-2,11-12 Mar 1995

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Elementary Secondary Education; Models; *Phonics; *Reading Instruction; *Teacher Role; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the continuing controversy of whole language versus phonics. It discusses both systems--how to plug the holes in them, and how to combine the two approaches, making for stronger instructional tools. The article also explains the analytic model of teaching reading. The article offers a series of recommendations for teachers, as well as recommendations for principals. Two figures outline the two reading models. (RS)

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INSTRUCTIONAL
LEADER
Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association

Volume VIII, No. 2 March 1995

ED 382 932

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WHAT EVERY PRINCIPAL SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TEACHING READING, PART 2:

Whole Language vs. Phonics

by
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Make no mistake: Reading is big business, and the stakes are astronomical. Children who don't read well are in grave danger of doing poorly in school and eventually dropping out. Because success in reading is so terribly important, schools face unrelenting pressure to produce high test scores.

How can principals and teachers do it all? How can we teach children to read well, raise test scores and nurture in children a love of reading? That's the vitally important theme of this six-part series on reading.

In Part 1, Bob Cole and I stressed the importance of making learning to read easy and enjoyable. We emphasized the need for modeling by expert readers, time for reading practice, support at home and reading materials that engage and stretch young readers' minds. Most reading programs are dangerously far from those goals.

This second article in the series will tackle the continuing controversy of whole language versus phonics. I'll emphasize the need to avoid being caught up in the pendulum swings between these two camps. Instead, in focusing on the child, I'll discuss both systems – how to plug the holes in them, combine the two approaches and make them stronger instructional tools.

High Stakes, Big Claims – and Too Little Research

Principals and teachers are expected to accomplish wonders in reading. Unfortunately, the high stakes involved seem to bring out the worst in many would-be providers of support. Products like

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"Because success in reading is so terribly important, schools face unrelenting pressure to produce high test scores."

EDITOR'S NOTE: **Marie Carbo** is founder and executive director of the National Reading Styles Institute (NRSI) in Syosset, NY. Dr. Carbo originated the concept of "reading styles."

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Whole Language vs. Phonics, cont. from page 1

"The truth is that some children do learn to read easily with phonics – and some do not. The same can be said of whole language programs."

"Hooked on Phonics" make it appear easy to teach anyone to read. Recently, however, after a whopping $200 million in sales, "Hooked on Phonics" was cited by the Federal Trade Commission for false advertising and insufficient research. [1]

Nor do the claims of superiority by advocates of phonics appear to be based on sound research. Richard Turner, a noted researcher and former vice president of the American Educational Research Association, investigated 70 years of research on phonics. He reported in ***Phi Delta Kappan*** that:

"[S]ystematic phonics falls into that vast category of weak instructional treatments with which education is perennially plagued.... Perhaps it is time for reading experts to turn away from the debate over systematic phonics in search of more powerful instructional treatments for beginning reading...." [2]

More recently, articles in ***Education Week*** have criticized both Reading Recovery and whole language for insufficient data. [3]

The truth is that some children do learn to read easily with phonics – and some do not. The same can be said of whole-language programs. Principals need to understand both systems and use the best of both along with other effective reading programs to help their students learn to read easily and well.

Danger: Pendulum Swing Approaching!

People have been searching for the single best way to teach all children to read for more than a century. No matter which approach to teaching reading enjoys popularity, reading failures persist, disillusionment spreads, and the pendulum swings to yet another approach.

High stakes only make the pendulum swing ever faster. The "look-say" method held sway for about 30 years (1940-1970) before the pendulum swung to phonics. Phonics was popular for only about 20 years (1970-1990) before whole language gained a strong foothold. And already, whole language is under fire, especially by advocates of phonics.

Amazingly, some approaches to reading are tried for as little as a year or two and then discarded if scores fail to rise dramatically. Too little funding available to train teachers in new methods, combined with a desperate need for quick successes, make a bad combination.

Analytic vs. Global Pendulum Swings

The occurrence of these pendulum swings is predictable, and so is their direction. When a global approach to reading enjoys popularity for a time ("look-say," for example), the pendulum then swings back to a more analytic approach, such as phonics. The resulting heated debates should come as no surprise.

People who believe fervently in global approaches to reading usually disbelieve analytic approaches passionately – and vice versa. Our emotions prevent us from making rational, reasoned decisions about what is best for young people. The debaters pit one reading approach against another – sometimes making exaggerated or false claims and counter-claims. In the process, the focus of the "great debate" moves away from where it must be: on the individual child. We must understand both the analytic and the global models of teaching reading if we hope to improve reading instruction.

It's generally not advisable to use a single approach to reading exclusively. Many combinations are necessary to accommodate the different learning styles for reading, or "reading styles," that are usually found within a single classroom. Having conducted extensive research on children's reading styles, I advocate selecting an approach that matches the style of the student. Since young children and poor readers generally exhibit more global than analytic characteristics, an extensive body of reading styles research strongly supports whole language as a framework for reading instruction – but only as a framework. The strategies within that framework depend on the reading styles of the particular students in

the group. Reading instruction should focus on literature, choices, fun and writing, with small amounts of direct instruction in phonics for those youngsters who learn well with that approach.

The Analytic Model

The analytic model of teaching reading moves from the parts to the whole, in the same way that phonics is taught (see Figure 1). The first stage requires mastery of isolated letter sounds. In Stage 2, students practice letter sounds by reading words containing the learned sounds. Next, they read a connected text or stories. This approach regards a knowledge of letter sounds as a critical skill for all learners.

The Global Model

The global model of teaching reading moves from the whole to the parts, in the same way that whole language is taught (see Figure 2). In Stage 1, large amounts of connected text are read aloud to students repeatedly. After the children can read the stories independently, they move to Stage 2, in which they practice words and phrases from the stories in isolation. In Stage 3, the teacher uses some phonics, often by encouraging children to "discover" similarities in words they have encountered in their reading and writing.

An understanding of individual reading styles will clarify what type of learner is likely to succeed or fail using each reading approach. Students have different strengths and weaknesses; every reading approach demands certain reading style strengths of the learner.

Figure 1: The Analytic Model of Teaching Reading

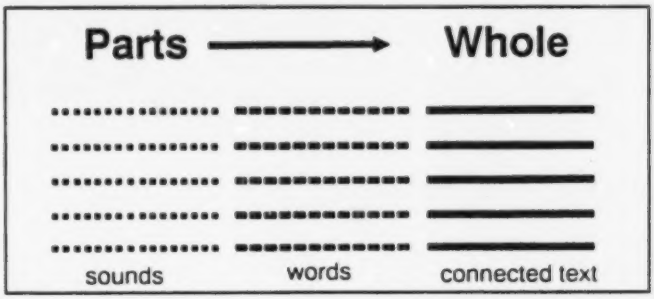
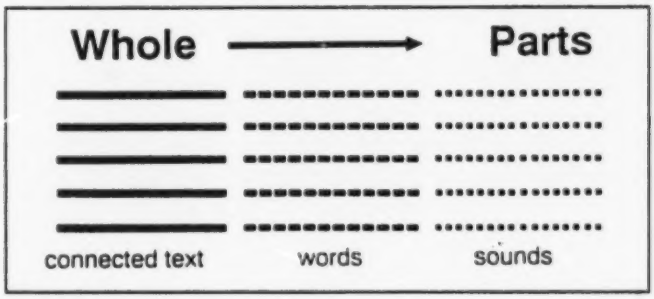


Figure 2: The Global Model of Teaching Reading



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"People have been searching for the single best way to teach all children to read for more than a century."

Phonics: Who Succeeds? Who Fails?

Youngsters who do well with phonics tend to have strongly auditory and analytic reading styles. Children who are auditory can hear and remember letter sounds. If they are also analytic, the logic of phonics makes sense to them for they proceed naturally from bits of information to the whole. Phonics instruction is usually highly sequential, organized, direct and predictable – all conditions that appeal to analytics.

But phonics can be confusing and boring to students who are not analytic, who don't learn easily when information is presented in

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small portions, step by step. As indicated in reading styles research, the majority of young children are global, not analytic learners. Moreover, there is great danger in overemphasizing phonics. Even the most analytic youngsters need a reading program that emphasizes literature. The most serious problems arise for students who are not sufficiently auditory to learn or to blend letter sounds. These students find phonics difficult or impossible to learn. If children cannot hear the differences among sounds, then they cannot associate those sounds with their corresponding letters. This situation is similar to that of a tone-deaf person who can't repeat a tone. Being sound-deaf can create years of problems – that is, if a youngster is exposed primarily to phonics instruction.

Whole Language: Who Succeeds? Who Fails?

Children who do well in whole-language programs tend to have visual, tactile and global reading styles. They can recall words they see and hear repeatedly in high-interest stories. Lots of experience with story writing helps tactile learners to remember words they have felt as they write them. Whole-language programs usually emphasize fun, literature, hands-on learning and peer interactions – all conditions that appeal to global learners.

But whole language can feel disorganized and haphazard to analytic learners. If the modeling of stories is too infrequent or if the teacher does not provide enough interesting repetition, such youngsters can fall behind quickly. Since the systematic teaching of phonics is not emphasized, some children may not develop the tools they need for decoding words. Finally, such strategies as invented spelling may confuse analytic youngsters who want to use correct spellings or children with memory deficits who are likely to persist in their invented spellings long past the early grades. Even children with good memories may have difficulty transitioning to traditional spellings if they invent their own spellings for too long a period of time.

Recommendations for Teachers

Here are some specific recommendations for improving phonics and whole language programs and ways to combine the best of both.

To Improve Phonics Programs:

- Balance your reading program; make its focus literature and fun. Read to your students often, choral read with them, and give them time to read both alone and in pairs.
- Guard against one of the most negative side effects of phonics: boredom. Be careful not to overdo phonics or worksheets. Spend only several minutes each day on phonics; do no more than one worksheet daily; allow children to work together.
- Include many games in your teaching. For most children, phonics is easier to learn if they are having fun and are not placed under stress.
- If your students are not able to learn phonics with a fair degree of ease, try other approaches. Remember, phonics is only one of many reading methods. Try recorded books, for example, or story-writing.
- Develop a well-stocked library in your classroom. Give children time to browse, read and discuss books.

To Improve Whole Language Programs:

- Balance your reading program. Continue to emphasize literature and fun while providing adequate structure and some step-by-step skill work, especially for analytic students.
- Provide sufficient tools for decoding words. Use small amounts of direct instruction in phonics for auditory and analytic learners. Try tape-recording phonics lessons so that students can work independently to improve these skills.
- Include games in your teaching. Since most young children are tactile, they often learn words and

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"We must understand both the analytic and the global models of teaching reading if we hope to improve reading instruction."

"An understanding of individual reading styles will clarify what type of learner is likely to succeed or fail using each reading approach."

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skills quickly with hands-on games.

• Don't use invented spelling for extensive periods with strongly analytic learners or with students who have memory problems.

• Provide sufficient modeling of reading aloud before expecting children to read independently, in pairs or alone. Use large amounts of shared reading, choral reading, or recorded books if necessary.

Recommendations for Principals

Here are eight ways to improve most reading programs in the shortest possible time. These suggestions combine the best of phonics, whole language and reading styles.

1. Emphasize the fun of reading. Fill hallway bulletin boards with exciting reading displays: paintings of book characters, imitations of such writers as Dr. Seuss, sign-up sheets for book clubs.

2. Recruit older children to make reading games for younger ones, including phonics games.

3. Do not allow youngsters to be referred to special education classes simply because they can't learn phonics. Make sure that other reading approaches are given an honest try first.

4. Help teachers to accumulate the books and shelving needed for classroom libraries.

5. Encourage reading aloud to children daily. Try to get into classrooms and read to children yourself as often as possible. Ask children what their favorite books are and how many books they've read. Demonstrate your enthusiasm for reading.

6. Purchase tape players and blank cassettes so that books can be recorded for youngsters. Children can listen to the tapes while looking at the words. This extra modeling is especially important for young people with limited proficiency in English, those who have been read to very little, or children who simply need repetition to help them learn.

7. Send teachers who are "movers and shakers" to some good reading seminars during the year. Follow up with meetings so that the best ideas are shared and used.

8. Finally, encourage both teachers and parents to learn and understand their children's reading styles.

* * *

Part 3 of this series will show you how to identify and capitalize on reading style strengths. I'll explain what reading styles means. I'll discuss some simple steps toward observing and accommodating children's differing reading styles, identifying styles with the Reading Style Inventory, and observing reading styles in action.

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